

The Heart; its Sacredness, its Worth, its Dying:

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SERMON

PREACHED AT DORCHESTER,

ON THE SUNDAY FOLLOWING THE DECEASE

OF

MRS. REBECCA STETSON.

BY NATHANIEL HALL.

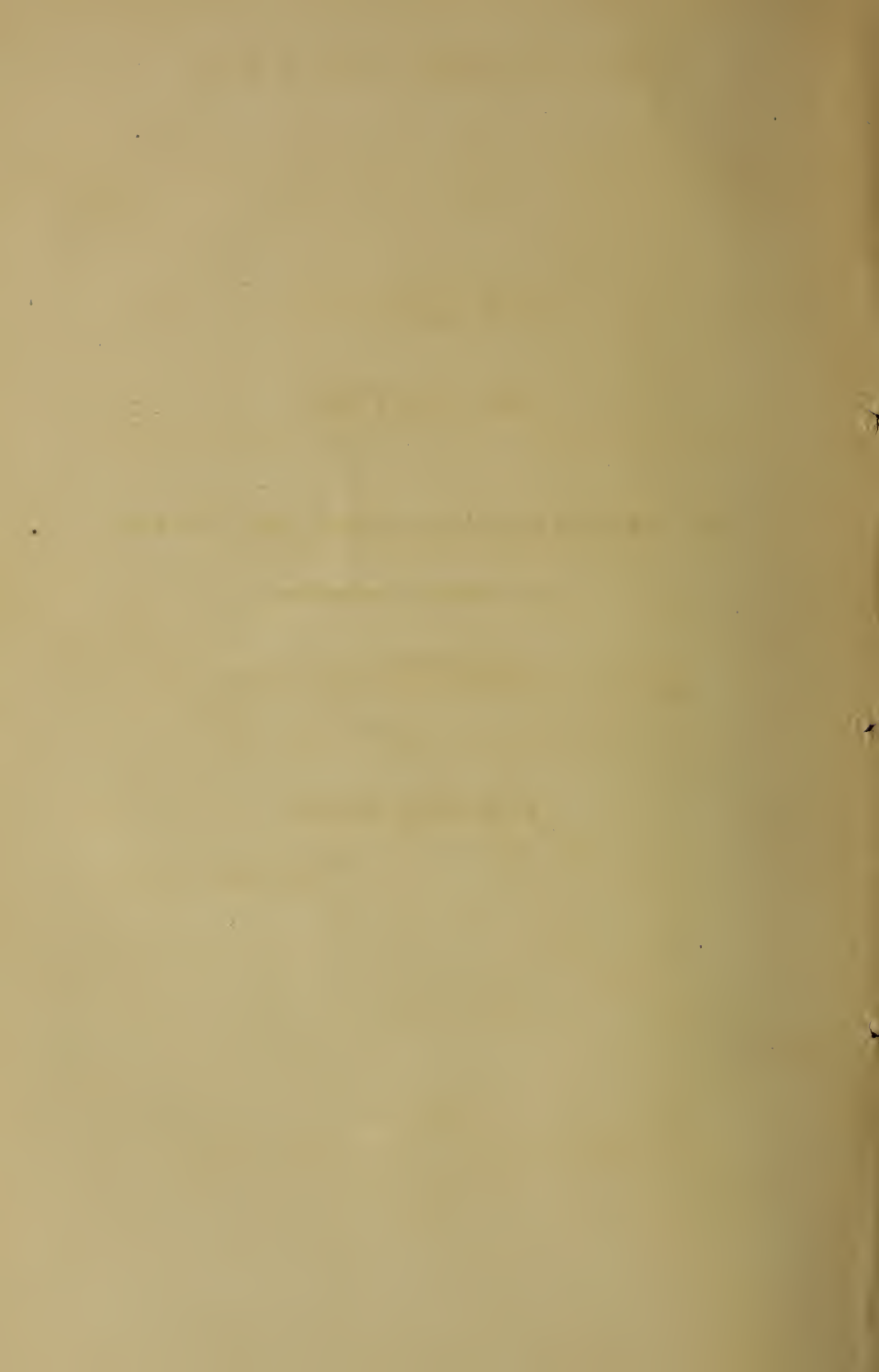
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TO
THE SISTERS
OF
THE BELOVED PARISHIONER AND FRIEND,
WHOM IT UNWORTHILY COMMEMORATES,

This Discourse,

PRINTED AT THEIR REQUEST,

Is Respectfully Inscribed

BY THE AUTHOR.

S E R M O N.

PSALM xxii. 26. — "YOUR HEART SHALL LIVE FOR EVER."

THERE is something, then, that does not die ! It is a joy to believe it. There are moods when nothing seems abiding ; when death seems empowered with a universality of sway ; when, one after another, object, resource, faculty, fail us, and we ask despondingly, "What next ? Is there aught unfailing, permanent, around us, within us ? Is not the universe one wide-spread sepulchre, as regards man and the very constituents of his humanity ?" Yes, there *is* something that does not die. "The heart," — by a manifold assurance, — "the *heart* shall live for ever."

Let us, first, give our thoughts to the sacredness and worth of that for which such a destiny is asserted.

The heart has a peculiar sacredness, as that portion of our nature, which, more directly and worthily than any other, images and reveals to us its divine Original; in which the essence of the Divinity, love, reflects itself and dwells. "God is love;" and by that affection in us, as by no other attribute of our being, does he communicate himself, does he give us the power to resemble, and thus to know him. The bond of our filial relationship with him, the feature that marks our heavenly parentage, is not the intellect, but the heart. Between the mind of Deity and that of man there can be but an imperfect resemblance, — between the originating Fountain of all truth, and the faculties which but dimly and laboriously discern it; but, with the moral and spiritual affections of man and those of God, it is otherwise. The difference here is not in kind, but only in degree. We love as God loves. The affection, in its essence, as a quality of being, is the same; and so, as ranking foremost among the things of the spirit, an apostle has placed love. "Now abideth faith, hope, charity; but the greatest of these is charity." How truly so, when, as I have said, it reveals to us God; when it makes possible our fellowship with him; when it is our pathway by which to find him! By no road

that the understanding can trace or travel will he stand spiritually revealed to us. To attempt thus to reach him is but to lose ourselves in a deeper darkness. "He that loveth not," whatever else he may know, "knoweth not God;" but "he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him."

And consider what care God has taken, as seen in the arrangements and relationships of life, for the heart's culture and expansion! How he has ordained, that, even before it has come into conscious existence, other hearts should bend above it in tenderest love, and draw forth, by their endearments, the first sweet smile that signalizes its awakening consciousness! Home is man's earliest school; and its earliest lesson is of love. Each dear relationship is an appointed agency to call into intenser life and to a wider embrace the unfolding affection; each friendly heart a proffered branch for its outstretching tendrils to inclasp, that it may mount the higher, and hang its glowing flowerets nearer to the sky. Were home what God designed it, what it might and should be, the heart would need no other than its own genial instrumentalities to train it to its deathless life. Within an atmosphere of truth and love, nursing it to a continually stronger and holier growth, and

intercepting not, by any cloud of earthliness, the sunlight and the dew of heaven, it would expand in living beauty, be raised from human objects to divine, and receive a growing fitness for its heavenly home. But such, alas! home is not; and that divine capacity, so full of God, the dearest of his gifts, is, how sadly, repressed and marred in its unfolding life! Nay, to what a large extent is the domestic circle, is the wider one of friendship, is society at large, a school of selfishness rather than of love! We are educated, how commonly, to subordinate our affections to our lusts, our love for others to our love of self, — educated by that most effective of teachers, example, at that most impressible of periods, youth. We are educated, and in our turn are educators, to the same wretched end. But God still keeps the heart within that earliest school, and, by its sterner discipline, softens and subdues it there. Sickness, — what a power has that, when it enters our homes, — by the solitudes it excites, the memories it vivifies, the ministrations to which it calls, — to break the spell of the heart's indifference, and win its affections to their truest life! And death, — oh, what a power has that, as it lays its icy hand on one who has sat with us, through many years, by board and fireside; or, if

not many, the stream of whose life has run mingling with ours, brightening and blessing it more than we had known! How then is every thought of self put by, in very shame, in very forgetfulness! How do we realize, as never before, the preciousness of that vanishing life! Its love, its sympathy, its companionship, its very presence, how dear, how indispensable, to us! How mean appear the objects, how barren the pursuits, for the sake of which, perchance, we had neglected it! The farewell whispers of those pallid lips; the unutterable meaning of that filming eye, as it turns upon us its last conscious gaze; the parting pressure of the hand that so often, in trustful affection, has been laid within our own; these, and all the solemn incidents of that closing scene, — how is the heart quickened by them to its intensest and its truest life! It is a dread experience; gladly would we be spared it: but God is in it, and lays a hand of blessing on the heart he pains. And although the sway of selfishness may but for a time be broken, and the heart yield itself as before to its unworthy thralldom, it does it against the felt persuasions of religion, the lingering echoes of departed voices, yea, against its own uplifted plea.

Consider, again, the heart — would you know more

fully its sacredness and worth — as a source of the most efficient moral power. Most efficient, I may safely say. For what has so wrought in the world, for beneficent and holy ends, as human love? What has so moved and swayed to goodness as the utterances of the heart, — whether in sermon or in song, in the impassioned plea of the forum, or the simple recital of the wayside, or the gentle pleadings of home? We talk of “eloquence,” that most abused of terms. But where is eloquence? Not with him, who, though accomplished in all the arts of oratory, has no warmth within his heart. Does *he* move men? With all his brilliancy, all his gifts, all his strivings to feign the fire he lacks, does he move them to any lofty issues? One word of genuine feeling is more potent than all his arts. The simplest utterance of a fervent heart will sway more surely to truth and right than the most rhetorical appeal that owns no higher parentage than the intellect, and no holier baptism than the turbid waters of self-love. How often are we made to know that the spoken truth is hindered of its legitimate and best effect, because accompanied, either by the coldness of indifference, or by the heats of passion! How apt are we to forget, in addressing others, though we never fail to feel it

when addressed, that the exhortation, the rebuke, the counsel, the warning, — whatever the form in which the mind expresses itself, — to have the power desired for it, must come from the fulness of a sincere and feeling heart; that the arrows of truth fail oftenest of their mark, not through lack of graceful polish, nor of vigor in the arm that sends them, but because they are not feathered with love! And what a source of power is the heart as a generator of thought; as an incentive to action; as throwing a revealing light on the pathway of moral truth, farther than the intellect alone could pierce; as prompting and nerving to deeds of nobleness which no motive of self-interest could have achieved; as firing the heroism of the public martyr, and the no less than martyr's heroism with which, in many a private and secluded sphere, duty is chosen, and privation suffered, and toils endured, and trials borne! The noblest virtues of the Christian life, active and passive, are but the bloom and fruitage of the spirit of love, of the divine sympathies and affections of the heart.

Consider, again, the heart as a source of happiness. Whence come life's truest satisfactions? Not where mostly they are sought, — from bodily comforts, from sensual gratifications, from ease and

fulness and power; nor from the attainment of knowledge, the triumphs of intellect; nor yet from human friendship and adulation and esteem; but from the exercise and enlargement of the heart's sympathies and affections. What, tell me, is the secret of a happy home? Its costly adornments? its abounding resources of external good? its freedom from the ordinary cares and privations and adversities of life? Nay: but the presence within it of glowing hearts; the banishment from it of all personal and selfish aims, — all jealousies, envies, distrusts. What a sad mistake, even on the score of happiness, and how continually made, — that of educating the intellect with assiduous care, and letting the heart go uncultivated and uncared for! As if knowledge could gain for one a satisfying joy, or the consciousness of talent or genius, or the fame or the gain of them, or any thing, with a narrow and unloving heart! As if that were a worthy education, which leaves the divinest capacities of the nature stunted and depressed, beneath the overlaying weight of formality and custom and worldliness and self-love! Surely, if we have ever given way to a purely disinterested emotion; if we have ever gone out of ourselves, really and truly, for others' sake; if we have ever

obeyed, in any worthy sense, the Christian law of love, — we must have had visitations, though transient, of a blessedness such as no success, no gain, no fulness of earthly good, could have given. And what were this blessedness, if the law and the spirit of love, instead of having within us an occasional and temporary predominance, were the consecrating influence of our life! Alas, that the problem should yet be unsolved to our experience!

And, now, consider the heart as, in the expressive simplicity of the text, to “live for ever.” With what an added worth and sacredness is it invested as bearing within it the element of immortality! Surely such is its heritage. That which, as we have seen, makes us kindred with the Infinite, is the door of his approach to us, the source of noblest power, of truest blessedness, bears, in this very fact, the pledge and charter of its onliving life; yea, the myriad voices, without us and within, that chant their affirmation to this great hope of immortality, find their key-note in the affections. But apart from such witness, and from that which meets us so clear and full on the pages of the New Testament, let me point you to what is furnished in the well-known fact, — the enduring life of the affections to the very verge of mortal existence, the

onshining of their heavenly star above the shadows wherein each mental light is, wholly or partially, inwrapped, — instances, known, I doubt not, to all of us, where they have increased in purity and intensity as the outward failed, and have put on their holiest beauty and all-commanding strength beneath the infirmities of extremest age and the chill shadows of impending death. Fact beautiful in itself, and beautifully prophetic, — the tenacity with which memory retains, even to the latest of life's evening hours, the scenes and incidents of earliest days. Though darkness is resting on all nearer objects, the images of life's morning are revealed in a distinctness of outline and minuteness of detail, as if things of a surrounding present, rather than a long-distant past. And no less tenacious is the *heart's* inclasping hold of the object of its earlier as of its later love. Not as a reminiscence, but as a fact of its present consciousness, does it feel the throbbing pulses of whatever true affection had bound it to the dear-departed of by-gone days. And what does all this foretell, if not that "the heart shall live *for ever*"? Why should love so burn on, and burn brighter even to the last, if it is not to be insphered in immortality?

The immortality of the affections has been touchingly foreshown to us in the life of that aged member of our church, by so many of us venerated and beloved, the long-looked-for event of whose departure has at length occurred. My theme was chosen with reference to her. Her life expressed it to me. To a degree the most uncommon did she live in her affections. Loving, gentle, tender, pure, they swayed her being ; they characterized and marked it. Liberally must they have been sown there by the Infinite Hand ; and no blight from a surrounding world seemed ever to have fallen upon them to mar their loveliness or restrain their growth. There seemed no element in her nature, no tendency, no thought, that was inharmonious with love, — a childlike, self-forgetful, all-embracing love. And it lived, even to the last, a manifested life. Through bodily prostration and mental enfeeblement it lived. Memory, save of things in her life's distant past, the reasoning, the reflective powers, had long been darkened ; but the affections lived on, an unclouded life. They lived thus even unto death, and, when the tongue was mute, smiled forth the kindness which they could not speak. And shall we name it *death*, — that change so welcome, so blissful, so life-imparting, as our faith

assures us it must needs have been? — the release of the spirit from its burdening infirmities, the call to come upward to its heavenly home. Change blissful indeed! To find the night all vanished, and the morning come, — morning so holy, so fair, so beautiful; to awake from so long a slumber of the active powers, to the conscious possession of them, in a greater vigor than of their earthly prime; from so long an imprisonment, to a freedom unknown before, and inconceivable in its inspiring largeness; from so long an isolation, to the surrounding presence and embracing sympathies of celestial associates, — to roam with them the fields of a boundless universe, and share with them the joys of an ever-living, ever-loving, ever-expanding and ascending Heart.